

MANAGING THE DYNAMICS OF “HAVING NOTHING TO SAY” IN SMALL GROUPS

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Abstract: People often are unable or reluctant to express their thoughts and emotions in a group setting. This article discusses the costs of such reticence to the individual and to the group. The psychological and cultural dynamics underlying the reluctance of group members to express their thoughts, perceptions, and emotions openly are analyzed, and the inhibiting effect of language is discussed. Ways of intervening to encourage identifying experiences and expressing emotions within groups are discussed. Guidelines are presented for coping with the expression of emotions by others in the group and for establishing boundaries in regard to the emotions and experiences to be expressed within the group.

In the early phases of a group’s development when relatively silent members are queried on what they are thinking and feeling about events taking place in the group, they often reply by stating they feel nothing and they have “nothing to say.” They present themselves as having no perceptions, no thoughts, and no emotions. Later, as the group develops, these relatively silent members—when confronted about their silence—often open up, expressing in vivid detail their incisive perceptions and emotions. Other group members are astonished at the insights and depth of feelings that these previously silent members bring to the group. The silent members themselves often discover that, although they might be quiet people, they have much to say that is of value in understanding what is happening in the group and that they have a wide range of emotions about the events taking place in the group.

THE COSTS OF SILENCE

Silent members withhold their experiences of life in the group. They may have numbed their feelings, for some reason, and/or lost touch with what they think and feel in social situations. Or, believing that their inner experiences have no meaningful value for anyone, they disconnect, trivialize, and dismiss what they feel and think while in the group. Because they believe that they feel and think nothing, and/or that their contributions are meaningless, they often feel empty. However, the paralyzing belief that they have had no pertinent experience or that they have nothing meaningful to say is a mistaken one. Everyone has an innermost experience of the world as it unfolds. We all have perceptions, thoughts, feeling, and emotional reactions to interpersonal events. We are what we experience, so discounting or denying our experience of ourselves leaves us feeling impoverished, superficial, empty, and lonely. What we need to discover and examine is the various reasons we disconnect and become distant or alienated from our experiences in interpersonal situations.

Within groups, fears of openly expressing and discussing emotions are often reflected in sarcastic comments about “touchy-feely” relationships or “trying to psychoanalyze each other.” Some people fear that any open expression of their emotions would indicate that they were in need of a psychotherapist. Not having developed their ability to experience and express emotions constructively, they feel incompetent to deal with their own emotions or the emotions of others.

Emotions are always embedded within interpersonal relationships, whether or not we are aware of them or whether or not we choose to discuss them openly. Members of a group become angry with each other, they feel threatened, they become upset, they become defensive, they feel hurt, they feel sad, they feel disappointed, they feel affirmed, they feel elated, they feel passionate about something, they feel discouraged, they feel alone, they feel manipulated, they feel frustrated, they feel competitive, and they experience pain and a whole multitude of other emotions. Within the life of a group one can at one moment experience laughter and in another moment experience tears. Commitment, ownership, and passion are common emotions that occur in groups.

When we do not openly deal with the emotionality that arises in working together, we not only collude to suffer in silence but our feelings become distorted and go underground. They seep out in the form of escalating fears, mistrust, gossip, rumors, scapegoating, apathy, boredom, feelings of stagnation, alienation, and a sense of being lonely in the midst of a group. These are but a few of the forms that unexpressed emotions can take.

INHIBITING EFFECTS OF CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

Culture

Most of us live in a culture that discourages introspection and emotional closeness in relationships, particularly in the context of work. We are used to engaging in social rituals, roles, and pretense in each other's presence, rather than expressing our experiences more openly and deeply. Rituals, roles, and pretense function as social walls that keep us from knowing either ourselves or one another at a deep level.

There are many explicit and hidden cultural messages that can blunt our experience of our emotions and discourage communication of our experiences and emotions. Messages such as "suffer in silence"; "don't cry"; "don't show that you're afraid"; "don't get angry"; "don't get too close"; and "don't upset others" discourage open expression of feelings. Sometimes we receive such messages explicitly, and sometimes we infer them from observing the behavior of others. We act as if these messages are "rules," mainly because we are not aware of the extent to which we have been influenced by our culture in regard to expressing emotions. No one has intentionally created this state of affairs, but we typically assume that emotions are not discussed because there is something wrong with them or that it is dangerous to do so because things might get out of control. Most of us are fearful of our own emotions—of losing conscious control and being overpowered and controlled by them. These fears can be noted in a group setting by the absence of the expression or discussion of emotions.

Some people mistakenly conclude that because their inner experience is not "scientifically derived" and belongs to a subjective world of emotions and perceptions, it is arbitrary and without personal or social value. This belief is reinforced by the tendency in our culture to deify "scientific" knowledge as the only valid knowledge. Because most of us feel distant from scientific knowledge, it is relatively easy to feel that we have nothing of importance to say. This belief is further reinforced by a belief that everything worth knowing is to be found only in articles or books. The assumption underlying this belief is that all important knowledge can be translated into language that is exact and precise.

Language

When we attempt to communicate our interpersonal experiences to one another we search for words to describe them; often it is an imprecise, inexact, and ambiguous process. Language is simply a symbolic attempt to convey our inner experiences, which consist of sensations, intuitions, emotions, perceptions, and images that are not directly communicable. When the language we use evokes a similar inner experience in others, the clearer we are in symbolically communicating our own experience. Yet we often know more of our experience than we can express through words. Much vicarious interpersonal and social learning happens without the use of words, through social observation of the actions of other people.

Similarly, interpersonal communications have nonverbal components that are outside the context of language. For example, a smile: an angry tone of voice: a trembling lip: a cold stare: a defensive stance are all nonverbal ways to convey a message without translating it into language.

Although in a sense we are all prisoners of language in conveying our inner experience, it is a tremendous relief to realize that at best language is a changing art form that we can use imaginatively to express our inner experiences. There are usually several ways that we can express a particular experience in language. This means that we can explore several ways of expressing ourselves to discover impactful and meaningful ways of relating to one another. Being open to exploring ways of expressing ourselves to one another is often an exciting and rich experience.

LEARNING TO EXPRESS EMOTIONS

Emotions are seen as potentially dangerous and destructive, thereby needing to be avoided and controlled carefully so that they do not surface in relationships.

Emotions that arise in working together are not an illness; they are part of the human condition and tell us what matters most and what is really going on between us. They are important voices for us to listen to in order to discover the message they are giving us. In withholding these voices from one another, we not only diminish one another but we also dampen our ability to learn from one another.

The language of emotions is a fuzzy one, because there are so many ways to express our experience of them. For example, we can choose to label our experience of feeling angry by describing it as feeling angry, irritated, annoyed, “pissed off,” “ticked off,” or resentful, to name just a few. The experience of anger is an inner sensation, while the words to describe it are exterior to us.

People who have denied or blunted their feelings have not developed ways of expressing them. Feelings to them seem like a secret code or foreign language that is unknown and mysterious. “Silent” group members often say that they “feel naked” when they begin to explore openly expressing their emotions within the group. They feel awkward and uncomfortable in trying to find ways of expressing their emotions. With practice, however, they become more expressive and enjoy it. Expressiveness need not be simply verbal; learning to embrace people with a hug can be an awkward experience but, with practice, one develops a sense of spontaneity, stemming from what is happening in the relationship.

Coping with the expression of emotions by others can cause us to feel apprehensive and frightened. For example, if a group member feels hurt and begins to cry the other members can

become apprehensive, partly because it stirs up their own hurts or sadness and partly because they are not sure how to respond. In fact, all they need to do is be with the person in a supportive way. They do not need to do anything to “fix” the person; the crying will end. At times a group uses one member to express emotions for the others. The important learning task for the group is to acknowledge their emotional pain and to learn how to express it personally. Similarly, members of a group may be apprehensive about how to respond to an angry outburst. Chances are that the angry member is not alone in having the angry feelings. The learning task for the group is for the other members to acknowledge and express their angry feelings, rather than pretend that only one member is angry. Group members can support both the angry member and the member who becomes the target for the anger. When they are able to acknowledge and discuss their reaction openly, they discover that the expression of anger brings them closer together, that they can all handle it in a constructive way, and that they can learn from it in a meaningful way.

Sometimes the process is quite uncomfortable, awkward, confusing, and messy. It takes courage to learn. For members of a group to make the most of the opportunity, they must have an intent to learn from one another in a constructive way. This may mean that, when heated exchanges take place, the members wait until things cool down so that they can examine what happened in a less impassioned way and heal whatever wounds occurred.

When group members begin to acknowledge and express their emotions, they learn how to manage the emotional life of the group more creatively. They begin to realize that when the energy level is low and members are restless and apathetic, there is an emotional logjam that needs to be surfaced and explored. They learn they can disentangle the emotional logjam in a constructive manner. They become skillful in disentangling emotional logjams that previously would not have been discussable.

When fears stifle our expression of emotions, we are not able to develop our capacity to handle them in a meaningful way and we are unable to confront our fears to discover how we have exaggerated them. Like an unused muscle, our capacity to express emotions can atrophy with the passage of time. The awkwardness and discomfort we feel in learning a new skill can be a relatively small cost for the benefits we can gain by developing our ability to acknowledge and express our experience. We can authorize ourselves to experience, express, and discuss our perceptions and emotions. With awareness and practice, we can become more complete in the way we create meaningfulness in our lives within groups.

The awkwardness and power of becoming more skilled in identifying and expressing emotions is shown in the example of a young engineer. He was in a group of scientists and engineers that I was consulting with on the dynamics of group development. At one session I provided them with a list of feelings to aid in identifying what they were feeling in the group. At the end of the consultation, the young engineer thanked me for helping him with his home life. He indicated he had always felt at a loss when his wife would ask him what he was feeling. He would almost automatically say, “Nothing.” She would then become frustrated with him. During the consulting sessions, he put the list of feelings I had distributed on their refrigerator. Each day he would select two or three feelings he was aware of experiencing and express these to his wife. She was delighted. Rather than being a prisoner of his existence he became a pioneer of his existence.

ESTABLISHING EMOTIONAL BOUNDARIES

A central issue for any group is establishing boundaries in regard to what emotions and experiences to express within the group. Probably the most important experiences and emotions to express are the immediate ones engendered by life in the group itself. This consists of the emotions members hold about what is happening in the group and what is happening in their relationships with other members of the group. It is directly relevant to the work they are doing together. The issue of how to relate the past experiences that members bring with them to the group is often cloudy. Probably the most important experiences are the memories that are triggered by being in the group. For example, a member who angrily walks out of the group and slams the door may have memories of similar times when he or she had similar feelings. The strong expression of emotions by one member can also trigger the memories of other members, and it may be quite productive to discuss these memories with the purpose of understanding their implications for the development and management of the life of the group.

When group members are looking for guidance outside themselves, they can look at what they might want a leader to do, or what they feel needs to be done, and then do it themselves. When members of a group do this, they become a “leader-full” group rather than a “leaderless” group or a group with a designated leader. We are what we experience and what we express; we are the ones who determine what work is meaningful for us; and we have a lot to say to one another. Each of us needs to take personal responsibility for making life in the group real and meaningful by speaking as best we can from our heart and our mind. When we do this, we are more apt to spend our time together in a way that strengthens our ability to deal creatively and constructively with issues that are of importance to us.

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